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ENGRAVED CELTS FROM THE
ANTILLES

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ENGRAVED CELTS FROM THE ANTILLES¹

BY

J. WALTER FEWKES

WHEN the West Indies were discovered by Europeans, the aborigines of those islands were living in what is called, in archeological literature, the Neolithic or polished stone age. A few chipped stone celts found in some of the larger islands indicate that, while the aborigines made casual use of such implements, they are so few in number that we cannot ascribe a Paleolithic epoch, or an age of chipped stone implements, to the islands.

The majority of stone objects known from the larger islands are finely polished, while those from the Lesser Antilles are of different form and have a rough surface. The former are called celts, the latter are commonly known as axes.

The peculiarities of these stone objects from the West Indies indicate that in prehistoric times the islands formed a sharply defined culture area; and the technic of the objects suggests occupancy by man for a considerable period, for many years were required for the development of the culture expressed by them. We find, furthermore, that the geographical distribution of the two different types of these objects can best be explained by the supposition that they belong to two radically different culture regions, which are readily distinguishable. These two subcultural centers, geographically speaking, are the Greater Antilles and the Lesser Antilles: the former characterized by the smoothly polished celt, the latter by the rough axe having an enlarged, well-developed poll differentiated from the blade by encircling grooves or marginal notches to accommodate the hafting. While the celt has no indication of a head, and the extremity of the blade tapers to a point, the head of most of the axes from the Lesser Antilles is often broader or larger than the blade, and is variously modified into projections,

¹ The material used in the preparation of this article was collected while the author was engaged in the preparation of a report on the archeology of the West Indies under the joint auspices of the Bureau of American Ethnology and the Heye Museum.

horns, or bifurcations, but very rarely takes the form of an animal's head.

The type form of celt from the Greater Antilles is of almond or petal shape, hence the term petaloid. Although petaloid celts occur in greater or lesser abundance¹ throughout the West Indies, this form is particularly characteristic of the Greater Antilles. Implements of this type are generally made of stone, but when suitable stone does not occur, shell is used for the purpose.

No implement of the polished stone epoch in America surpasses the petaloid celt in the regularity of its form or in the beauty of its superficial finish, the surfaces of many of these objects being as smooth as glass. There is considerable variation in their size, but only slight modification in their profile, the general almond or petaloid form being constant.

A cross-section of one of these implements, taken midway in its length, is generally oval;² but a few are rectangular, save that the angles are somewhat rounded. The greatest breadth of a typical petaloid is near the middle. These celts have blunt edges and taper to a point; grooves or perforations for hafting are never found.

The petaloid type of celt grades almost imperceptibly into the axe form, or that with the poll modified into a head and without the pointed blade end.

Petaloid celts figure extensively in the folklore of the modern islanders. In Porto Rico and other Spanish islands of the West Indies petaloid celts are commonly called *piedras del rayo*, "thunder-stones," and they are also so designated in the English islands. They are supposed by the country people to be endowed with magic power, and are regarded as efficacious in healing certain diseases; they are likewise believed to protect the natives from lightning, being frequently deposited for that purpose under the thatch of

¹ The petaloid type occurs as far south as Trinidad, its northern extension being the Bahamas. About ninety percent of all stone implements from the Greater Antilles are petaloid celts, while an equal proportion from the Lesser Antilles consists of axes.

² It has been stated that grooved axes (as distinguished from celts) are not found in the West Indies, but in the Heye Museum we find them well represented from St Vincent and other islands of the Lesser Antilles. The author has seen very few axes of this type from the Greater Antilles.

the roofs of their cabins. In St Vincent and other islands "thunder-stones" are placed in earthen jars to keep the drinking water pure and cool. They are conspicuous in the equipment of the African *voodoo* or *obia* men of the islands, who are said to employ them in some of their rites of sorcery. Indeed there are many superstitions and considerable folklore associated with these stones. It is said that they are sometimes found in trees riven by lightning, while others declare they penetrate the earth and come to the surface in seven years. A true thunder-stone, according to some informants, may be determined by binding a thread about it and applying a lighted match. If the thread burns, the stone is genuine. Several specimens bear superficial marks of having been tested in this way.

The writer has found several petaloid celts in his excavations in caves and shellheaps in Porto Rico, but most of the hundreds of examples obtained by him were purchased from the country people, who, finding them in the soil while cultivating their *canucos*, or small farms, preserve them for the purposes above mentioned. The majority of those purchased by the author are slightly nicked, the points or edges having been broken by their finders in the belief that they contain "electricity."

Specimens of Antillean petaloid celts with figures or faces carved upon their surfaces are rare. These probably were carried by the pointed extremity.¹ The most highly ornamented bear a morphological likeness to idols, and their forms imply more than the term "decorated celt" would indicate, for some of them are figurines to all intents and purposes. However, the step from the incised celt to the idol, as elsewhere with man in the lower stages of culture, is here so slight that nothing can be gained by ascribing one use or name to the engraved petaloid and another to the petaloid in human form.² The form and symbolism of the petaloid celts

¹ The term "decorated celt," or celt with incised decoration, may suffice to designate the simpler forms of these, but it does not adequately apply to the highly developed members.

² The monolithic stone celts, or those in which blade and handle are carved from one stone, are supposed to have been ceremonial in nature, or to have been used in religious practices. Incidentally they indicate the manner in which a wooden handle was attached to a smooth undecorated celt, and may throw some light on the probable way in which the celt with a figure engraved on one side was used.

with figures engraved upon them have led the author to the belief that these objects were never furnished with handles, but were used symbolically as insignia of rank by carrying in the hand by their pointed ends or inserted in staffs for the same purpose.

Engraved celts have been collected in the Bahamas and the Greater Antilles, but none has been found in the lesser islands. The specimens in the following list¹ comprise the more important variations in this type.

1. Berlin Museum, No. 1
2. Rae specimen
3. Berlin Museum, No. 2
4. British Museum (four specimens)
5. United States National Museum
6. Heye Museum
7. Museum of the University of Havana
8. Copenhagen Museum
9. Heye Museum (stone "dirks")
10. Blackmore Museum (stone "dirks")

Examination and comparison of the specimens here listed show that while they vary considerably in form, there is a sufficiently well-marked resemblance to warrant the assignment of all to a single type. In its simplest form the incised petaloid celt can hardly be distinguished from an undecorated petaloid, the only difference being the human face cut upon its surface.

1. *Berlin Museum, No. 1.*²—This specimen (fig. 1) is one of the simple forms of ceremonial petaloid celts. Its thickness is slight, compared with the breadth, and the lateral as well as the terminal edge is sharp. The specimen measures 13.5 in. in length, 3.25 in. in breadth at the middle, and 2 in. in thickness. The main feature of this celt is the incised circle on one side, enclosing other circles indicating eyes and mouth. Below this face, the arms with elbows upward are indistinctly represented by slight grooves. The speci-

¹ The author knows of the existence of others, but having no notes or figures pertaining to them, further reference is omitted.

² It is with great pleasure that the author here acknowledges his thanks to the authorities of the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde for permission to publish illustrations of these objects.

men came to the Berlin Museum from Dr Grosser, the German consul at Plaisance, Hayti.

2. *Rae specimen*.—Mr Theodoor de Booy has called my attention to an almost identical specimen found on a farm in New Providence, Bahamas, and now owned by Mr C. S. Rae of Nassau. Mr de Booy believes this specimen is mentioned in a work on the Bahamas, but he has not seen it figured. To supply this want he has sent me drawings from the specimen itself, with the dimensions indicated. The extreme length is 10.5 in., the width 3.5 in., and the thickness 1.5 in. The face of the celt is 2 by 1.75 in. A circle represents the face, and is confined to one side, the opposite surface being plain. It seems probable that this celt was brought to the Bahamas from a neighboring island, and its close similarity to that from Hayti, above mentioned, suggests the latter as its place of origin.

3. *Berlin Museum, No. 2*.—This incised celt (fig. 2),¹ said to have come from the Danish island of St Thomas, is one of the most beautiful ceremonial petaloid celts known to the author; its technic recalls stone objects from Santo Domingo, Porto Rico, and Hayti.² The outward form of this specimen, seen in profile, is petaloid; the figure engraved upon it is well carved and was unmistakably designed to represent a human being. It measures 8.25 in. in length by 3 in. in



FIG. 1.—Engraved celt, Berlin Museum, No. 1. (Length 13.5 inches.)

¹ These figures and the preceding were made by my friend W. von den Steinen, of the Berlin Museum.

² Probably this celt came originally from one of these islands, rather than from St Thomas.

maximum width. The details of both surfaces are so well shown in the illustrations that there is no need of an extended description. The style of the figure is thoroughly Antillean, and is very char-

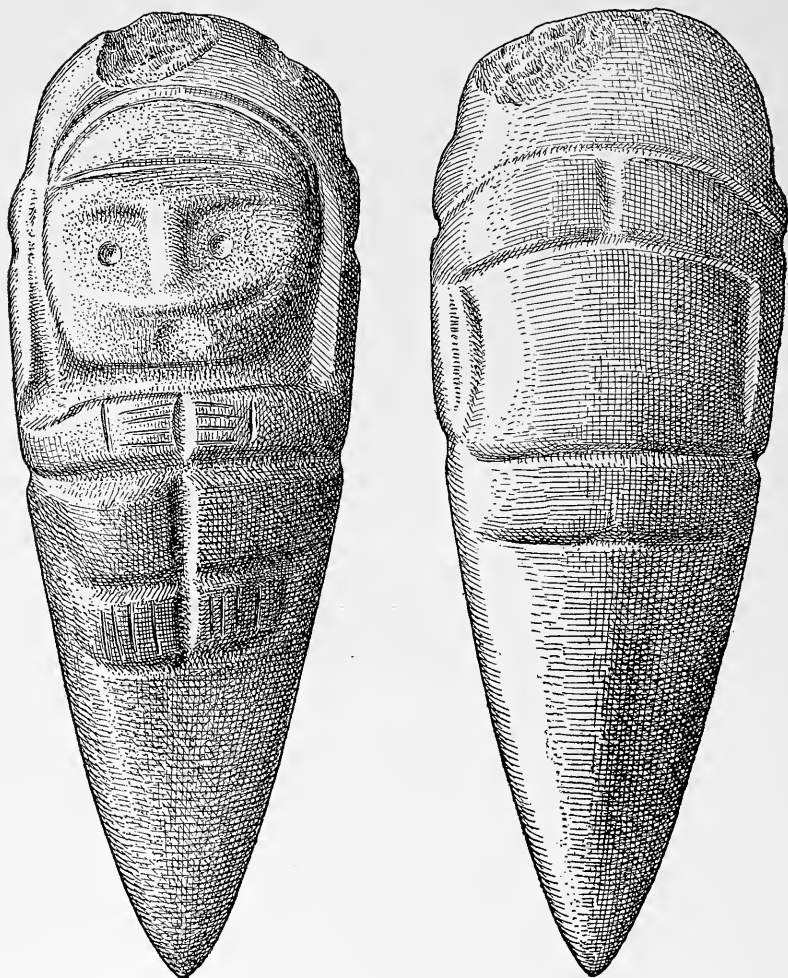


FIG. 2.—Front and rear views of an engraved celt, Berlin Museum, No. 2.
(Length 8.25 inches.)

acteristic of the motive so constantly found in engraved figures of human beings from these islands, especially those cut in low relief

on stone, shell, or bone. This specimen may be regarded as an intermediate form between a smooth celt with a face incised on the surface and that in the Royal Museum in Copenhagen, to be considered later, in which the celt form has almost disappeared.

4. *British Museum* (four specimens).—Four specimens in the British Museum preserve the petaloid form, but they are not so symmetrical nor so well made as some others.¹ They are, however, especially instructive in that they show an elongation of the pointed end in the form of a handle, while the cutting edge may still be seen above the head. The position of these celts in a hypothetical series illustrating the modifications in the type would lie nearer the simplest than the most complicated form. This shows connection with another series, for they grade into a group of globular stone objects, or heads, with handles, a form without indication of a cutting edge and showing no relation to celts.

5. *National Museum*.—This instructive type specimen of engraved or ceremonial celts, from Santo Domingo, first described and illustrated in the author's work on the Aborigines of Porto Rico,² was formerly in the collection of Archbishop Meriño. This specimen has the true petaloid form, on one side of which eyes, nose, and mouth are incised in an oval representing a human head cut in low relief. The hands with the fingers drawn up under the chin, and the low projection rising between them, display a feeble attempt to represent either the body or its appendages. On its reverse side the surface of the implement is plain and slightly curved, as is true of all celts on which a face or a head is represented on the opposite side. There is no good reason to believe that this celt had a handle, as no sign of former attachment is to be seen; indeed if there had been a handle, a part of the sculptured figure would have been concealed thereby. The celt is of greenish stone and measures 14 inches in length.

6. *Heye Museum*.—Mr Theodoor de Booy collected in the Bahamas a broken ceremonial petaloid celt, which is now in the Heye Museum. The edge of this celt and the surface bearing the

¹ These have been figured and described by Mr. T. A. Joyce, *Jour. Anthr. Inst. Great Britain*, n. s., XXXVII, pl. lv, figs. 1-4.

² *Twenty-fifth Ann. Rep. Bureau of American Ethnology*, pl. xv, a.

figure are mutilated, but enough remains of the body to enable us to know its form and to verify Mr de Booy's identification.¹

7. *Museum of the University of Havana*.—Aside from a brief field note made by the author, there is little information concerning a ceremonial petaloid celt now preserved in the University of Havana. This specimen is thus referred to in the author's pamphlet on the Prehistoric Culture of Cuba:

"Among the objects seen in these two collections [Academia de Ciencias, and the University at Vedado] are ten petaloid celts in the Academy museum and double that number at the University. One of those in the latter collection has a stone handle like those obtained in 1903 in Santo Domingo. There is also a celt with a face cut on one side—evidently a ceremonial celt like one in Archbishop Meriño's collection."²

8. *Copenhagen Museum*.—There is a remarkable engraved petaloid celt in the Ethnological Museum of Copenhagen, Denmark. This specimen (fig. 3) is of a hard black stone, well made, and its surface is smoothly polished. It is said to have come originally from Santo Domingo, and to have been added to the Museum in 1861. Through the kindness of Professor Sophus Müller, director of the Museum, the author was able to make the photographs from which the accompanying illustrations have been reproduced. The only other figure of this object appears in Rudolf Cronau's work on America.³

STONE "DIRKS"

Certain implements with carved figures and with long blades ending in a point, ascribed to prehistoric Santo Domingo, find a fitting place in our classification in conjunction with the ceremonial petaloid celts. Their form is somewhat different, but they may readily be assigned to the same type. The main difference is the absence of a cutting edge, the object being prolonged into a pointed blade. Two of these objects are known to the author.

¹ This specimen is figured by Mr de Booy in his article on Lucayan Antiquities, *American Anthropologist*, n. s., vol. xv, no. 1, p. 6.

² *American Anthropologist*, n. s., vol. vi, no. 5, p. 594.

³ *Amerika. Die Geschichte seiner Entdeckung von der ältesten bis auf die neueste Zeit*, Band I, p. 357, Leipzig, 1892. Cronau labels the figure of this object a "hand weapon," an identification that is not far from correct.

9. *Heye Museum*.—On his expedition to Santo Domingo in the interest of the Heye Museum, Mr Theodoor de Booy collected a stone “dirk” which, while allied to some of the incised ceremonial celts, still shows a form quite unlike any previously described. The

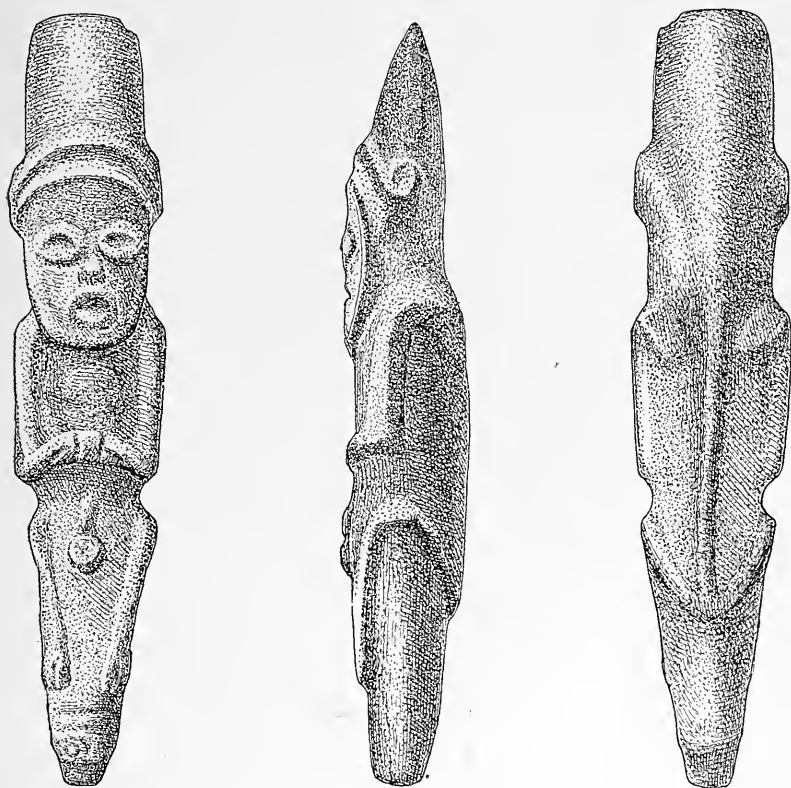


FIG. 3.—Front, side, and rear views of engraved celt, Copenhagen Museum.
(Length about 15 inches.)

specimen was formerly in the collection of the late Señor José Gabriel García, of Santo Domingo City. Its general form (fig. 4), as shown in Mr Baake's drawings, resembles a dirk, the handle of which is modified into a blade. It measures 8 inches in length.

10. *Blackmore Museum*.—Stevens¹ figures another object of this

¹ *Flint Chips. A Guide to Prehistoric Archaeology*, London, 1870. According to Stevens (p. 226): “Two similar specimens are in the Christy collection. Another is in the collection of Mr Hodder M. Westropp of Rookhurst, Cork; and another, said to have been found at Aigueperse, near Riom, Puy-de-Dôme, France, is in the Clermont Museum.”

kind which also came from Santo Domingo; it shows indications of secondary work, and the tool marks upon it, according to

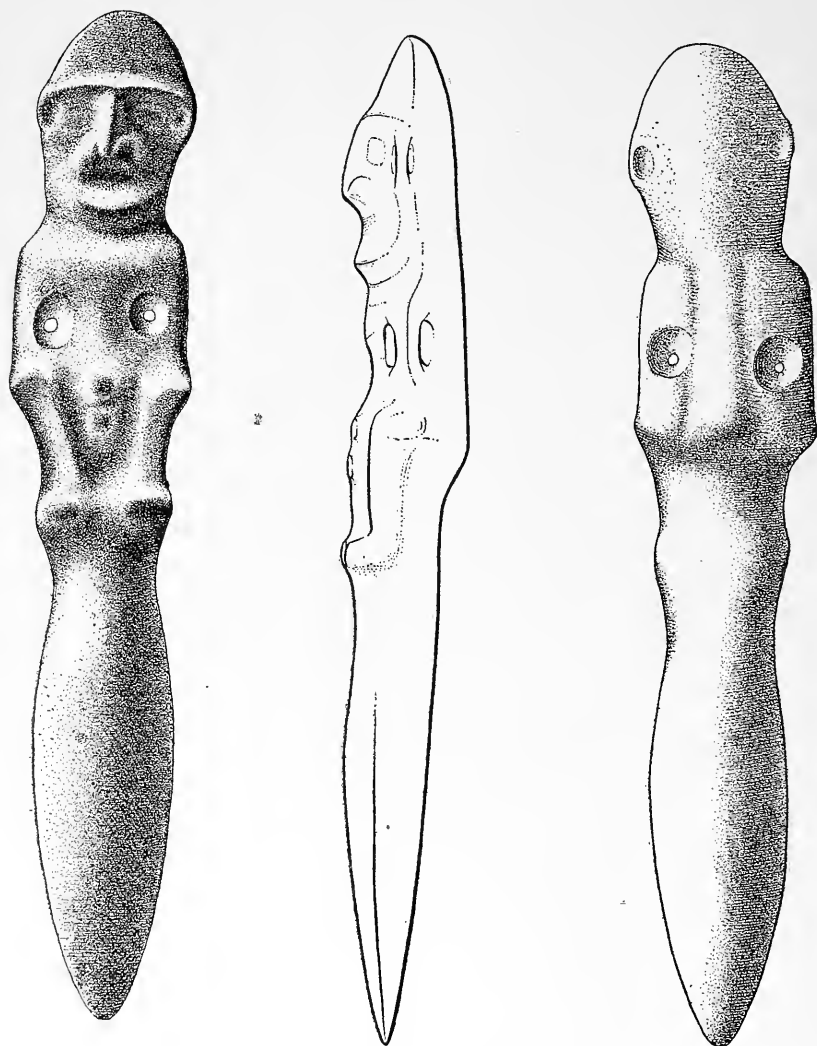


FIG. 4.—“Dirk” in the Heye Museum. (Length 8 inches.)

Stevens, “have been removed by subsequent polishing.” This author also calls attention to a “sketch of a somewhat similar

weapon" engraved upon a map of Santo Domingo, published by Charlevoix in 1731.¹ This specimen is described as having been found in an Indian sepulcher.

In considering the morphology of these "dirks" we may suppose theoretically that they present the most highly specialized form of incised or ceremonial petaloid celts, but it may be that the part corresponding to a blade was used as a handle by which the object was carried in the hand, this handle possibly having been inserted into a staff, or set in a stand, or even planted in the ground. The use of these objects is problematical, but there is no evidence that they were ever tied to handles midway of their length.

CONCLUSION

While the celts above described have, in one or two cases, no longer a petaloid form, their relation to an undecorated petaloid is evident, for the main characters of the type are preserved and the modifications are not difficult to follow.

The cultural differences in the prehistoric aborigines of the Greater and the Lesser Antilles are nowhere better shown than in their typical implement forms. Stone implements of the Greater Antilles are celts without grooves for hafting, while axes with marginal notches, enlarged heads, or encircling grooves characterize the Lesser islands. The celts of the former islands recall Central American and North American forms; the axes found in the Lesser Antilles are South American in type.

Celts with either smooth or decorated surfaces, as described in the preceding pages, are rarely found in the chain of islands from Anagada Passage to South America, nor have similar petaloids yet been reported from the adjacent continent. The petaloid celt may therefore be regarded as characteristic of the Greater Antilles, as are also elbow-stones, stone collars, and tripointed stone zemis or idols. The technic of these objects from the West Indies is

¹ The following footnote reference to this map appears in Stevens: "The map is entitled, 'L'Isle Espagnole sous le nom Indien d'Hayti, ou comme elle étoit possédée par ses habitants naturels lors de la découverte, avec les premiers Etablissements des Espagnols. Par le Sr. D'Anville, Geographe Ord. du Roi. May, 1731.' The figure of the implement has been copied in the 'Trans. Amer. Ethno. Soc.,' vol. iii, pt. 1, fig. 7 a."



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superior to those found in the southeastern area of the United States, but is not better than those of the coast of Central America, a fact which, so far as it goes, points to ethnic kinship with the latter rather than with the former area. It can also be shown that the stone axes of the Lesser Antilles, like the ceremonial petaloids above described, likewise bear incised decorations on one side, although so far as known these incised figures represent geometrical designs and not human faces or bodies.

There are a few known Antillean axes in which the head is cut into the form of an animal. A specimen from eastern Cuba is the best known example; this probably came from the Greater Antilles, where it may have been transported from an island farther south. This specimen, now in Madrid, has been called a *zemi* (idol) and identified as a fish; it is figured by Poey in a paper on the archeology of Cuba,¹ and is practically identical with several known Antillean axes the heads of which partake of human or animal forms.

In a future article the author hopes to consider this and other forms of incised and engraved Antillean axes from the chain of islands extending from St Thomas to Trinidad. Excepting the probability that they are ceremonial in nature, they have little in common with the incised celts characteristic of the Greater Antilles.

¹ "Cuban Antiquities: A brief Description of some Relics found in the island of Cuba," *Transactions of the American Ethnological Society*, vol. III, pt. I, pp. 185-202, New York, 1853, reprint 1909.

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